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Inequalities and the 'Essence' of Populism on Trends in Global Politics

1. *Introduction*: P*opulism as an emerging and enduring challenge*[1]

There is a mediatic consensus that the recent years have been deeply and broadly marked by populism. Still, within and without academia, confusion and disagreements endure over the question 'what is populism?' Consequently, the purpose of this article is twofold: first, it provides definitions and clarifications about populism. Secondly, it further explores the relation between populism and (in)equality, whose centrality is highlighted by the definitional inquiry itself.

The topic of populism has lost some of its immense popularity since the start of 2020: the general public and political analysts started debating whether populism would survive, exploit, or suffer the pandemic (e.g. Rachman 2020; Sehran 2020). The view that Covid would have thwarted populism was relatively fashionable at the outbreak (Champion 2020). Other experts suggested that this might have no effect, a variety of ef-

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fects, or even reinforce populism in the longer term (Mudde 2020; Bergsen 2020). Comparative reports also show that the answer to the question appears to be highly contextual (Katsambekis, Stavrakakis 2020).

To assess whether and why populism is actually enduring in such a deeply transforming world, one has to identify its central and persisting traits. Without any pretense of exhaustiveness, and with an awareness of the notoriously 'protean' (Gellner, Ionescu 1969) or 'mercurial' (Stanley 2008, 108) nature of populism, this article focuses on its relationship to inequality and illustrates its centrality.

Hence, it sets out by recalling some topical aspects of the reflections by Nadia Urbinati (2019a; 2019b), Chantal Mouffe (2018), and Federico Tarragoni (2019). These are synthesized in the first section about "Contemporary Theoretical Perspectives On Populism". While Urbinati considers populism a disfigurement (2019a, 113) of democracy, with its tendency to embrace a *pars pro parte* conception of political leadership (2019a, 119), Chantal Mouffe acclaims the renewed possibility of the emergence of a "Left Populism" to challenge an increasingly dysfunctional neoliberal global hegemony. Within the limits posed by constitutional democracy, and which distinguish constructive 'agonism' from destructive 'antagonism' (Mouffe 2018), the elaboration of a 'chain of equivalences' binding together all resistances against manifold subordinations and outright oppressions would be, according to Mouffe, the catalyzer and realizer of such 'populist moment'. Finally, Federico Tarragoni criticizes the "dominating paradigm" in the political science of populism that he calls "populology" (*populologie*: Tarragoni 2019, 31; and *ibidem* chapter II. All translations from Tarragoni's French are mine). By opposing it to a historically-grounded reconstruction of the populist tradition, Tarragoni contests the trans-ideological, non-ideological, demagogical, or authoritarian characters which are often projected onto populism. On the contrary, argues Tarragoni, "the ideological and historical tradition" of populism is "plebeian and radically democratic" (Tarragoni 2019, 394. For a converging analysis focused on the US history see Postel 2019). These three thinkers offer fresh insights over the nature and state of populism from a variety of standpoints: more critical and detached (in the case of Urbinati) or more engaged and appreciative (in the case of Tarragoni, and especially of Mouffe). Yet in all their diversity, they converge in drawing what can be called a 'consensus': populism appears as

a configurational moment or strategy which situates the populist leader, party, or movement against the (supposedly) hegemonic elites, and in line with the interests of the populace. This holds independently from its sincerity or opportunism, or even from its being situated at the ideological or rhetorical level (for a typology of theories of populism as ideology, style, or strategy see Gidron, Bonikowski 2013, 17; 2016), as well as from its immediate triggers in any specific scenario: therefore, the core nature of the populist dynamic does not appear as a mere epiphenomenon of neoliberal contemporary politics, but rather is entangled with the millennial fabric of politics. There are, however, differences between these authors. The most relevant of them is that Tarragoni's point is all about distinguishing genuine from unauthentic and misunderstood populism (see also Mondon, Winter 2020), while for Mouffe 'the people' is a "floating signifier" (Laclau 2005).

The convergence is nonetheless sufficient to sketch a deeper historical-theoretical grounding of the concept of populism, such as the one pursued in section 3. This begins at least from the time of Machiavelli, who appealed to a "ferociously populist" (McCormick 2001; 2011) check over elites and incorporated a lengthy discussion about the 'virtues of populism' (McCormick 2018) of sorts. Tarragoni and other important theorists-historians of populism, such as Camila Vergara (2020a) have delved into other, more recent, and most classical examples, and identified populism with its "plebeian politics" (Vergara 2020a; 2020b). The principal such examples are the Russian N*arodniki* ('those of the people') and the American People's Party in the late 19th century, as well as many Latin American regimes more recently, including contemporary ones.

In order to dispel the terminological disagreement, while accounting for the important distinctions drawn by Tarragoni (as well as by Vergara and others), I propose to differentiate two layers of 'populism'. In the more general one, the 'populist moment' is an ever-present possibility of mobilizing the energies of the popular 'part' with a view to a renovation of the leadership or the elites. As it has manifested itself historically, however, populism has mainly incarnated a progressive struggle, and when it entangled some forms of nationalism, these were usually "civic and inclusive" and not "ethnic and exclusive" (Tarragoni 2019, 394). The merits of the former and "thin-centered" (Mudde 2004) definition are that it corresponds to the everyday use of the term and it foregrounds

the formal opposition between people and elites. Its limits are that by employing it exclusively, one refers to movements all across the political spectrum, and the 'populist' feature will most often be insufficient to categorize their political ideologies (see the discussion on Tarragoni below). There is also a danger of popularizing extremist and ethnonationalist political movements by granting them the 'populist' banner they opportunistically claim (Mondon, Winter 2020). This is especially acute when they actually disregard the interests of their popular voters (Krugman 2018; 2019).

The narrower definition is more historically and ideologically charged. To be populist, a party, leader, or movement needs to be in line with the radically progressive tradition that has named itself populist. This view of populism – populism is 'people vs elites, plus something else' – is more normatively charged, and compels to renounce the use of the term in many of its current occurrences, even when the relevant party, movement or leader, or the electorate or political commentators believe that what is at stake is a rhetorical or genuine opposition 'people vs elites'.

Given this definitional and theoretical clarification of the meaning of populism, how can it inform an understanding of current politcs? These issues are addressed in section IV, where a brief overview of socio-political dynamics entangled with populism introduces a discussion on the central topic of inequality. Globalization has brought about new polarizing cleavages (Koopmans, Zürn 2019; Helbling, Jungkunz 2019) around which the ever-present possibility of populism materializes: the problem of 'Global Inequality' (Milanovic 2016) is therefore conferred a new depth along its mutually reinforcing power and economic dimensions. There can hardly be a greater distance between 'the people' and elites than in the global arena, and there can hardly be greater economic disparity than that between the losers of globalization, deprived of even the most basic welfare rights, and the winners, securing riches on a world scale.

In the concluding section (5), it will be argued that, in this context, the confused and confusing, oftentimes emotional and disarticulated reaction by populism revolves around attempts at reasserting and rearticulating enduring political categories and tendencies in a transforming and insecure environment: these include, most importantly, the friend-enemy opposition, especially in increasingly polarized two-party democracies, but also – and more variedly – the redefinition of the elites

in terms of transnational and private powers. Seen in this light, more positive appreciations of the constructive aspects and founded claims of populism can be reassessed (first of all Mouffe's, but see also Kaltwasser 2012; Kriesi 2014; 2018). C*ontemporary* populism can thus be understood as a re-articulation of enduring structures of politics in response to the global, surprising, and in many respects elusive transformations of the present. Metaphorically, it can be described as an attempt at rebuilding the *polis* while its foundations are shaken in a reluctant, conflictual, open-ended, and diversely realizable integration with the *cosmopolis*.

2. T*hree contemporary theoretical perspectives on populism*

> [I]t is an axiomatic feature of literature on the topic to acknowledge the contested nature of populism [...], and more recently the literature has reached a whole new level of meta-reflexivity, where it is posited that it has become common to acknowledge the acknowledgment of this fact (Moffitt and Tormey 2013, 2, cited in Gidron and Bonikowski 2013, note 1).

This endless contestation implies that, when one reflects over populism, there is a risk of becoming entrapped by ambiguities and generalizations.

Yet this article vindicates the pragmatic validity and fruitfulness of this conceptual category by showing the role it plays in the reflections by Urbinati, Mouffe, and Tarragoni, in this section, and in understanding political history and current politics, in the next. These three authors offer interestingly converging (and no less interestingly diverging) perspectives on the topic.

In conclusion to this section, a 'residual consensus' over the nature of populism will also be identified in the configurational relationship between people-populism-elites.

2.1 Nadia Urbinati

Nadia Urbinati is one of the leading contemporary interpreters and critics of populism through the lenses of political theory, and she has recently produced a systematic analysis that both takes stock of a large literature on the subject and offers updated insights on the phenomenon.

To begin with, she firmly situates "populism within the global phenomenon called democracy, as its ideological core is nourished by the two main entities – the nation and the people – that have fleshed out popular sovereignty in the age of democratization."(Urbinati 2019a, 111).

Despite its genealogical connections to democracy, populism alters it profoundly: it "consists in a transmutation of the democratic principles of the majority and the people in a way that is meant to celebrate one subset of the people as opposed to another, through a leader embodying it and an audience legitimizing it" (*ibidem*). These two elements – and the related concerns – structure Urbinati's reflection over populism. On the one hand, populism pursues a *pars pro parte* (Urbinati 2019a, 119) identification of its majority – seen and/or presented as the *true* people – with the constituted *demos*. Nonetheless, it aims at establishing such hegemony through electoral victories, and is, under this respect, different from Fascism (*ibidem*: for a more detailed comparison between Fascism and populism, see e.g. Urbinati 2019b, 17-26; 134-135). On the other hand, populism cultivates the ideological oxymoron of "direct representation" (Urbinati 2019b, 8) as a form of more genuine and efficient democracy to be opposed to party politics and liberal democracy. By doing this, populism calls into discussion the ordinary division of powers, and in particular the relation between the electorate and the executive. This latter is seen as a quasi-personal if not completely personal relationship, a connection full of emotional features, or even an empathic projection (Urbinati 2019b, 40). These elements characterize the "disfigurement" of democracy operated by populism, especially when it seizes power (Urbinati 2019a, 118-124) and makes resort to a plebiscitary instrumentalization of consensus.

The preceding might be sufficiently explanatory for what concerns the symptoms and syndrome: yet when she describes the etiology of populism, and conditions for its thriving, Urbinati's account is also helpful. First of all, she echoes Norberto Bobbio's reflection over the unfulfilled or broken promises of democracy (Bobbio 1987) by singling out "the growth of social and economic *inequality*, so that for a large part of the population there is scant or no chance to aspire to a dignified social and political life; and the growth of a rampant and rapacious *global* oligarchy that makes sovereignty a phantom" (Urbinati 2019b, 4, emphases added). These two dynamics have become inescapably urgent in recent decades:

> The expansion of globalized financial capitalism has progressively weakened the decision-making power of sovereign states (democratic ones in particular). And a globalized labor market has narrowed the possibility of striking the kind of social-democratic compromise between capital and labor that served as a foundation for postwar party democracy. (Urbinati 2019b, 203. See also *ibidem*, notes 28 p. 255 and 10 p. 254 for further bibliography on the matter).

It appears from this diagnosis that Urbinati's reading of the role of populism is not entirely negative: populism "comes to play two roles that were traditionally played by social-democratic parties: denouncing social inequality and the privileges of the few (who do not need national belonging to protect their interests), and reclaiming the power of popular sovereignty and its emphasis on the priority of majority interests" (Urbinati 2019b, 203). A similar appreciation also lays the ground for Mouffe's "maximalist" account (Urbinati 2019a, 28; 117-118) of populism.

2.2 Chantal Mouffe

In Urbinati's words, a "maximalist theory" of populism "offers not only a conception but also a practical template for the making of populist movements and governments" and "proposes a discursive, constructivist conception of the people" (Urbinati 2019a, 117). Urbinati is explicit in including Mouffe's account in this strand.

For present purposes, Mouffe's *For a Left Populism* is especially salient. The 'for' in the title makes the parenetic purpose of the work immediately evident, as well as stressing the perspective taken by the author. Mouffe denounces a "crisis of the neoliberal hegemonic formation" and that one – but she tellingly dialogues with a *we* – should "seize this opportunity… for the construction of a more democratic order" (Mouffe 2018, 8). Since her earlier theorization with Ernesto Laclau (Laclau 1985) – to whom the 2018 book is also dedicated – Mouffe construed populism as the "radicalization of democracy" embracing "the multiplicity of struggles against different forms of domination" (Mouffe 2018, 8). In hindsight, however, her more recent contributions had to come to terms with "a regression" (Mouffe 2018, 9), as she showed (Mouffe 2005) "how, having accepted the hegemonic terrain established by Margaret Thatcher around the dogma that there was no alternative to neoliberal glo-

balization, her famous 'TINA', the new centre-left government ended up implementing what Stuart Hall has called a 'social-democratic version of neoliberalism'" (Mouffe 2018, 9).

Yet, Mouffe's hopes in the countering of this hegemony by a left populism have not subsided. Her interpretation of the opportunity opened up by the 2008 crisis, by the ensuing anti-establishment upheavals, and even by the most recent pandemic and economic crisis (Mouffe 2020) is that "In recreating political frontiers, the 'populist moment' points to a 'return of the political' after years of post-politics" (Mouffe 2018, 11).

In Mouffe's proposal, this reconstruction should revolve around a non-essentialist 'articulation' (Mouffe 2018, 46) of the people as a political subject.

> This 'people' is not to be understood as an empirical referent or a sociological category. It is a discursive construction resulting from a 'chain of equivalence' between heterogeneous demands whose unity is secured by the identification with a radical democratic conception of citizenship and a common opposition to the oligarchy, the forces that structurally impede the realization of the democratic project (Mouffe 2018, 41).

While the opposition to the elites is key in suggesting the "minimalist" (Urbinati 2019a, 116-117) 'definition' – brackets are here needed as the account provided in this article is also non-essentialist under this respect – another point worth deepening is Mouffe's diagnosis of the crisis of neoliberalism. This latter is closely superimposable to the traits already highlighted by Urbinati – namely, the loss of political, economic, and social power by the masses who benefitted less from globalization.

While a whole chapter of hers (2, in Mouffe 2018) is entitled "Learning from Thatcher", Mouffe does not condone the outcomes of Thatcherism, which she sees as but another strikingly successful version of neoliberalism: "The core of this new hegemonic formation is constituted by a set of political-economic practices aimed at imposing the rule of the market – deregulation, privatization, fiscal austerity – and limiting the role of the state to the protection of private property rights, free markets and free trade" (Mouffe 2018, 13). By securing hegemony across the left-right spectrum of party politics, as well as by winning electoral consensus by offering an unprecedented mix of liberal and 'egalitarian' – or more ap-

propriately 'meritocratic' – promises, this neoliberal, technocratic 'radical center' (Mouffe 2018, 10) has been left unchallenged until a set of crises exposed its dangers and damages. By then, however, these had become hardly reversible.

2.3 Federico Tarragoni

Tarragoni offers an overview of populism which differs both from Urbinati's and Mouffe's: while it still concedes ground for establishing a consensus on the relationship between populism and equality, Tarragoni's critique has also a historical and definitional dimension which enjoins to distinguish the political phenomena hastily collected under the ample umbrella of 'populism'. By paralleling Max Weber's (1958) study on Protestantism and capitalism, as well as referring to Weber's conception of the value-freedom of social science, Tarragoni (2019 27; 389) rejects many usages of the term 'populism', both in academic and popular discourses. He opposes to them a historically informed analysis of populist movements, that he concludes by emphasizing the plebeian, progressive, and open conception of the people promoted by historical populisms.

Contrary to those who claim that populism is a-ideological, or trans-ideological, Tarragoni argues that such understanding of the term would render it practically meaningless, and even play an absolutory function for political phenomena that promote exclusivist ethnonationalist agendas (in this Tarragoni account converges strongly with Mondon, Winter 2020; 2018).

Tarragoni's examples are effectively illustrative here (Tarragoni 2019, 94 ff.). In 2018, the two Italian populist movements – the Five Stars Movement and the League – formed what themselves together with commentators described as a 'populist' government'. The same collapsed in about one year, as the two parties appeared ideologically opposed rather than simply different over a number of crucial issues. Tarragoni also recalls several parties in countries like Greece and France that have been all called populists despite being incompatible and often competing or even fighting each other. In particular, Tarragoni argues, commentators who conflate Syriza with Golden Dawn (in Greece: see Tarragoni 2019, 20) or the Front National with La France Insoumise (in France), often do so to disqualify such radical alternatives to the neoliberal paradigm. This

would be coherent with the attempt of presenting the center itself as somehow 'populist', as in the rhetoric of Emmanuel Macron (Tarragoni 2019, 102). However, this blurring of ideological boundaries would be especially slippery, besides being blatantly confusing, since according to Tarragoni these identifications push toward the creation of political chimeras, or even encourage progressive and leftist constituencies to reconsider the far-right. Most importantly, Tarragoni holds, this (ab)use of the term populism would not be consistent with a much weightier and specific recognition of the heritage of the classical populist movements.

Tarragoni's claims, while deeply rooted in the historical study of populism, can be qualified. They point to traits of the historical tradition of populism which reach beyond the general opposition between people and elites, without discarding the importance of this latter. Furthermore, in line with Urbinati's and Mouffe's observations recalled above, they strongly connect populism with the plebeian struggle against inequality, especially in contemporary politics: Tarragoni's critique of neoliberalism is just as radical (305). Finally, his distinction aims at telling apart populism from ethnonationalism, with which the former is often confused.

However, this second, narrower, and historically valid definition of populism does not cover the broader, current use of the term. And this is not strictly required by the distinction between populism and ethnonationalism itself, as two authors who are as sensitive to that distinction, Mondon and Winter, imply by offering a broader and more neutral definition:

> We understand populism as a discourse centred on a construction or constructions of 'the people' against a similarly constructed 'elite'. Parties that are explicitly far right, far left, socialist, nationalist, racist – or subscribe to any other ideology – can also be populist, but none is populist by definition. They can be said to be populist to the extent that they rely in their discourse on the construction of a people against a real or perceived elite. 'The people' can thus be inclusive (the poor, 'the 99 per cent') or exclusive (white men, British people based on nationality or race). Populism is thus neither good nor bad, and it cannot be used on its own to explain any political phenomenon: there is no such thing as a populist party (Mondon, Winter 2020, 193).

Mondon and Winter's conception accounts for the error of conflating populist parties from the right and from the left, which is also among Tarragoni's main concerns. They clearly concede that these parties can rely on an inclusive articulation of 'the people', which is what Tarragoni attributes to the civic nationalism of historic populism, especially in Latin America. Yet their supple use of the term is to be commended both for its capacity in explaining its underdetermined meaning in everyday political discourse as well as for its exposing of the fundamental opposition people vs elites.

2.4 A consensus on populism and inequalities?

The evident differences between the scholars of populism discussed so far should not obscure the commonalities which offered the occasion for their comparisons, and provide a venue for the continuation of this analysis. At the very least, and more or less explicitly, these thinkers agree on two central points.

The former is the denunciation of the role played by inequalities in contemporary politics. Urbinati, Mouffe, and Tarragoni hold almost identical views – despite the variety of their sources – on the shortcomings of the political ideology which has become hegemonic in later decades and established its controversial interplay with the immense yet destabilizing potential of globalization. The technocratic and meritocratic elites, whom Mouffe calls "the radical center" (2018, 10; 1998), have made the core of their agenda immune to political contestation by successfully disseminating the same values across the right and left, and by depoliticizing the policies dictated by expertise. Parts of the masses, especially in the middle and working classes, by reaction, have become increasingly pressed to look, if not for an alleviation of their plights, at least for voices, and they turned to those who presented themselves as 'anti-system' or extra-system: namely, and in most cases, populist parties from the left and right. It should be mentioned that, in many cases, this phenomenon has been largely exaggerated by the media: for instance, Mondon and Winter show that Trump and Brexit's popularity among the working class is by far less pronounced than is often claimed or assumed, especially if one considers non-voting. Nonetheless, they also recognize that the existence of substantial support by people with lower and especially middle income is real.

The second point is no less crucial and concerns the endless debate over the meaning of the expression 'populism' itself. From Mouffe, Urbinati, and Tarragoni's account, one derives an image of populism as a configuration in the relationship between 'the people', 'the elite', and populist parties/movements/leaders themselves. As I argued in presenting Tarragoni's critique, here I embrace merely a 'minimalist' description of how this constitutes the demos (for the minimalist/maximalist distinction see Urbinati 2019, e.g. 28). That configuration often takes the form of resistance or liberation, wherein the populists portray themselves as the only genuine projection of 'the people' in the domain of agonistic politics.

There is no necessity to be concerned with the classic question about the sincerity of this political and rhetorical move here. The *possibility* of the genuineness of at least *some* populist movements seems not to be ruled out, especially in the light of the broad variety of contexts and instances of populism. Nor the issues they address should be discarded as instrumental *a priori*. This article shares these authors' views on the seriousness of the globalization/neoliberal crises, which now applies to the pandemic and post-pandemic one as well. Yet this second element – the people-elites-populists configuration – should not be confined to the context of contemporary history to apply, nor the presently staggering global inequality is a problem entirely without continuity with one of the fundamental political questions.

3. P*opulism and inequalities: history and 'essences'*

Equality and inequality are notoriously difficult to approach as abstract dimensions of socio-political issues. As Raymound Geuss (2008, 76) notices:

> Many have found it tempting to follow the French Revolutionaries in counting É*galité* as one of the cardinal political virtues. No one, to be sure, who wished to follow the lead of Marx and Engels even approximately could take this line, because both of them had been very firm and explicit antiegalitarians, or, rather, they had held that abstract equality as a social ideal was philosophically incoherent, and whether concrete equality in some respect was or was not desirable in some particular circumstances was always an open question.

If Marx and Engel's theoretical caveats thus epitomized by Geuss recommend treating (in)equality as a concrete and specific political issue, rather than an abstract and universal one, Amartya Sen and James Foster (1997, 1-2) also relativize the concept under a socio-historical-cultural perspective:

> The Athenian intellectuals discussing inequality did not find it particularly obnoxious to leave out the slaves from the orbit of discourse, and one reason why they could do it was because they could get away with it. The concepts of equity and justice have changed remarkably over history, and as the intolerance of stratification and differentiation has grown, the very concept of inequality has gone through radical transformation.

The kinds of inequalities mentioned thus far, and which are relevant to understand the success of the political phenomenon of populism, are manifold: from inequality of power, of economic resources, of education, of social capital, to the national, ethnic, and international inequalities which are often both the subject and the explanation for populist rhetoric and politics. Yet these have also been recurrent themes in the history of Western political thought, where *the many* and *the few* are divided by their numbers as well as by inequalities in powers, riches, and interests. From Aristotle to Seymour Martin Lipset, equality and (widespread) prosperity have been seen as means if not prerequisites for democracy: "…perhaps surprisingly, equality and inequality of resources are issues addressed by Aristotle in his P*olitics* [as] a way of avoiding faction (e.g., P*ol*. V.3 1304a38-b5)" (Gottlieb 2018, 257) and "the more well-to-do *a nation*, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy" (Lipset 1959, 75, emphasis added). The methodological, contextualist warnings introduced earlier in this section should suffice to convince that this thread in Western political thought can only be understood as a chain of Wittgensteinian 'family resemblances'. Yet this does not pose difficulties for the non-essentialist approach of this article.

In the midst and at an important turning point of this historical tradition, among the humanist thinkers who marked the beginning of modern political theory (see for instance Manent 2007), Machiavelli stands out as the one who most insightfully theorized over a conception of populism and the way this is connected to inequalities (especially inequalities in power).

It seems that, for Machiavelli, the fundamental political cleavage – *popolo* and *grandi*: the people and the 'great ones' (nobles/elites) – arises out of a 'natural' inclination toward domination, in the case of the latter, and resistance to being subjugated, in the case of the former. The third element of the political dialectic he reconstructs, the prince, famously assumes the role of the protagonist who tips the balance, but is always in relation with the other two. And despite all his contextualism and attention to circumstances, Machiavelli is clear that "it is only on the people, and not on the *grandi*, that s-he [the prince] can ground power" (Balestrieri 2014). It is therefore not entirely surprising that, despite his pro-prince stance and the sympathies manifested for (some) tyrants, Machiavelli is associated by McCormick with the democratic tradition, and especially the populist one (McCormick 2018). McCormick's conclusion is trenchant toward a prestigious scholarship in political theory, Machiavellian, and democracy studies that he accuses of being more or less explicitly elitist, and especially in rehabilitating the (potential) function of populism:

> [...] overly alarmist responses to "populism" and a persistently expressed mistrust of majoritarianism pervade contemporary democratic theory. Prominent scholars may complain about the threats that wealth inequality and elite prerogative pose to popular liberty in contemporary democracies, and yet they too often devote the full thrust of their critiques to demonstrating how populist movements and popular majorities actually pose a more dangerous threat to liberty than do elites (McCormick 2018, 205).

Camila Vergara also draws on McCormick's account of Machiavelli explicitly and heavily (Vergara 2020, 233, 237, 244) to defend a "republican interpretation of populism" based on non-domination and popular empowerment. Two main elements are worth stressing. The first is that, in line with Machiavelli's theory, these "plebeian politics" is not an arbitrary preference for the popular component. The popular and elitist parties are not equivalent: protecting the people means ensuring non-domination by those who are defined by their appetite for power: even when leaving aside the contingent distribution of power, the relationship between the people and the elite is not symmetrical. Secondly, Vergara shows that Machiavelli and Roman history reveal a lack of direct plebeian represen-

tation which risks hijacking contemporary liberal democracies in favor of the interests of the elites: this seems especially true in a moment when traditional post-war party politics and unionization have given way to a destructured politics wherein the popular components have lost voice and protection.

In his account of the constitutive elements of politics, as well as of the ways and institutions to temper them, Machiavelli is deeply indebted to his classical sources, and the dynamic configuration of the people, the elites, and the prince is an original elaboration of the traditional repertory which was left in inheritance from Plato, Aristotle, and Polybius to the Middle Ages and the earlier humanists. What is distinctive in the Florentine thinker's interpretation is mostly the new – and positive – role attributed to conflicts in political life, which makes his account 'agonistic' (Geuna 2005, compare with Mouffe 2018, e.g. 10, 14-15). Yet even a historical reading of the relation between populism and inequalities should not go as far as essentializing categories such as the *popolo* and the *grandi* (Balestrieri 2014). When this is avoided, both populism and inequality maintain the general and open-ended meaning which makes it possible to apply them to specific contexts and circumstances without foreclosing a flexible usage and a fine-tuning to these, and without falling into the fallacies of abstraction which have been denounced by Geuss and Sen at the outset of this section. Vergara shows how this plebeian vocation of populism is declined coherently throughout the history of populist movements and parties. This invites speaking of an 'essence' of the problem, especially through a historical perspective, even if by employing brackets and even question marks. And this as well makes it possible to map the fruitful perspective offered by such a deep tradition into an unprecedented context such as contemporary globalization.

4. P*opulism and inequality*

What are, then, the specificities of contemporary politics, and especially those brought about by (de)globalization? Broadly speaking, one could identify three aspects as central: the crisis of national identity; transformations in the shape, meaning, and possibilities of democratic expression; and the condition of postmodernity, especially as seen from a so-

cial-cultural standpoint. This list is complemented by the corresponding reactions and de/anti-globalization. The repertoire is derived from reflections over the 'broken' or 'unfulfilled' promises of democracy (Bobbio 1987; compare with Müller 2014), and these can usefully be presented as 'dilemmas' or unsolved nodes of democratization in the light of the contemporary, globalized condition (Mazzola 2021).

This sketch of the contexts of the emergence of issues of (in)equalities in association to contemporary social conditions can be further complicated by the acknowledgment of the possibility that their evolutions are not linear and that changes can be reversed, or even give the occasions for backlashes. This is especially true of the first divide recalled here, the one relative to national identity, which is the most important about globalization. The divide might even have been exacerbated, as a consequence of the transformations forced or accelerated by the pandemic.

Populism intersects with all of these dynamics in a complex way, and this explains the confusion and vagueness of discourses about it. Nonetheless, this final section is devoted to singling out the specificity of the dimension of inequality and to expounding over it. As inequality is an elusive and multidimensional concept – think about the inequalities of status implied by the nation-states system – the focus is here on inequality of a measurable kind, and especially socioeconomic, without losing sight of its various and more general contexts of emergence and their complex interplay with populism.

The basic and simple intuition that grounds this reflection consists in noticing that the opening of the 'Pandora box' of globalization, that is to say, the trespassing of the national dimension of politics, and the integration of economic, social, and cultural dynamics into the international arena, has disrupted the structures that traditionally reined in inequality, and has opened up new possibilities for (un)equal socio-economic-political relationships which are insusceptible to being treated or solved in the classic framework of democratic politics. As a sheer matter of fact, economic global inequality seems to be "much worse than we think" (Hikel 2016); as a matter of logic, the opening up of the global dimension has rendered the emergence of situations that are either unequal or unordered under the respect of equality more likely and urgent. In a certain sense, and to resort to an analogy with temperature, it is not only *actual* inequality that counts but also inequality as it is *experienced*

or *perceived*, and globalization has an impact on all of these levels. For example, inequality in education within a certain country is normally tempered by the fixed ceiling offered by that country's structures and policies, as well as by the compensation provided by parallel equalities with those affected by this dimension – say in citizenship, shared language, and cultural norms, etc. On the opposite, inequality of education in the globalized world can stretch as far as the distance which goes from a peripheral village in the Global South to the leading – and often expensively unaccessible – institutions in the Global North. The person who crosses this space might find oneself, depending on whether this will happen on the one extreme, at the middle, or on any point in the spectrum, at odds in both educational opportunities *and* newly acquired language and culture *and* income – as income level for the same job can increase manyfold by migrating. Furthermore, the same person might experience increases in political opportunities – say, by being able to participate in local elections in one's country of residence, while voting as a citizen in the country of origin or, in the most extreme scenario, that of dual and multiple citizenships which characterize a part of the global elite, by acquiring international political powers. Or at the opposite: in the case of an undocumented, a stateless, or a refugee, the same person would possibly be even more unequal in power and under other respects as the country of destination is reached. These examples show that, once the ceiling and floor of the national dimension are removed, inequality becomes vertiginous and cuts across a plurality of intersecting dimensions – once again, cultural, educational, political, economic, linguistic, legal/of status, etc. These new possibilities of experienced unmitigated or less mitigated inequality hold independently from the global trends of inequality per se.

Yet further exploring these latter trends also helps explain why populism, despite all the contextual differences and specificities, is increasingly more relevant as a global phenomenon. Following Branko Milanovic (2018), it should be acknowledged that the effects of globalization on inequality are manifold and that some crucial developments are impossible to predict. Still, Milanovic also explains that, in recent decades, a worrying phenomenon has fueled the successes of populism, at least in the West:

> Rich countries' workers are squeezed between their own countries' top earners, who will continue to make money out of globalization, and emerging countries' workers, whose relatively cheap labor makes them more attractive for hiring. The great middle-class squeeze, driven by the forces of automation and globalization, is not at an end (Milanovic 2018, 214).

This progressive erosion in the status of the middle-class has not been properly addressed – if at all – by politics. And while he seems to suggest that inequalities between some countries – especially in the West and in Asia – might be mitigating, Milanovic is scathing in answering the concluding question of his book, that is, whether globalization will remedy economic inequalities: "No. The gains from globalization will not be evenly distributed." (Milanovic 2018, 239). More specifically, domestic inequality within WENAO (Western Europe, North America, and Oceania: Milanovic 2018, 170) has increased, while the top earners in these countries have increased their distance from the middle and working classes. This trend is especially evident in the US and the UK but has nonetheless affected even the more egalitarian European societies significantly.

Inequality between countries, or "global inequality" as Milanovic calls it, has in some respects even decreased in recent decades. The "growth of the global middle class and the top 1 percent" (8) is however no consolation to those who have been left out. Also, this "global middle class" is quite sharply localized in contexts such as China and other Asian countries. Even the top 1%, however, has been deeply affected by the economic crisis that started in 2008. Did this alter the widening progression and perception of inequality in the West? Not so much, answers Milanovic. First of all, the top 1% includes a relatively large number of people in the richest countries: about 70 million, that is, as many as the inhabitants of France (37). What is most concerning, however, is that even among this group, "The Real Global Plutocrats: The Billionaires" were less affected by the crisis or were even able to gain from it (41). In 2013, this group included 1426 individuals, "one- hundredth of one- hundredth of the global 1 percent". It might therefore appear that emphasizing their political and social relevance cannot be justified quantitatively. That things stand otherwise is sharply evidenced by the further characterization of this group by Milanovic (42): "this super- tiny

group of individuals and their families controls about 2 percent of world wealth. To put it differently, these billionaires own twice as much wealth as exists in all of Africa". To appreciate this comparison, one should also recall that the population of Africa is over 1,2 billion. Again, these figures might appear less shocking to those who are aware that inequalities have been enormous for much of recorded and especially recent history. Yet this perception is once again easily corrected by Milanovic when commenting on the growth of the wealth of the super-rich between 1987 and 2013: "both the number of hyper- wealthy people and their combined real wealth have expanded by a factor of five ($2.25 trillion versus $0.45 trillion)" and "the share of the hyper-wealthy individuals expressed in terms of world GDP has more than doubled, from less than 3 percent to more than 6 percent" (43-44). More generally, domestic inequality has increased almost everywhere.

Milanovic's analysis also suggests that these trends affect unskilled workers in richer countries much more negatively than those in the Global South. This is linked to the three main sources of rising inequality in rich countries. While there is a complex interplay between these sources, they can be analytically distinguished into three categories. The first one is the international economic integration which is evident in offshoring and in the diversification of the markets, both for the acquisition of supplies and sales. The second is technological change, which is rendering increasingly large shares of labor superfluous – everyday examples would include self-checkouts and table ordering apps which became increasingly widespread with the pandemic. The third is the institutional transformation that interacts with the previous two in a complex and reflexive way. For example, the dismantling of the system of unions is both a consequence of these changes in the workplace, workforce and supply-and-demand balance of labor and a cause that make these very dynamics harder to rein in and resist.

Another point from Milanovic's conclusions that is worth recalling is that the reduction of inequality to its formal-legal dimension – namely, by excluding income and economic inequality – is a mistake (226-230). In fact, this article, and the plebeian theories of populism it recalls, agree on suggesting the opposite, as the plural forms of inequalities can interplay, but each of them is relevant also. There cannot be substantial equality without addressing the economic dimension, which is measur-

ably and objectively worrying. Milanovic's account should also be commended for its perceptiveness in reconstructing the *ideological* side of this increase in inequality. He explicitly resorts to false consciousness and hegemony (201) to explain how workers and the middle class in Western countries are consistently distracted from what is evidently one of their most acute problems: the 'cultural wars' which have lent space to political polarization in recent years assume an entirely different meaning when framed into this perspective. It is in this cultural and ideological perspective that Michael Sandel, a philosopher mostly known for his critique of Rawls (Sandel 1982) has turned to discuss populism and political polarization more recently (Sandel 2018a; 2018b; 2020). Ideologically, Sandel identifies in populism a reaction to the radically meritocratic individualism and competition of recent neoliberal theory and politics. Sandel criticizes the refrain 'You can make it if you try', together with the 'politics of humiliation' (Sandel 2020, 29) it gives expression to. Besides being largely empirically false in a world where a "person could become a Wall Street banker rather than a yoga instructor simply because of walking down the right street (and meeting the right person) one evening" (Milanovic 2018, 215), the phrase has a moral and normative implication. It suggests that those who fail have only to blame themselves for not having tried hard enough or well enough. More generally, Sandel argues, when rentiers are more rewarded and respected than the workers who guarantee the functioning of society through their menial yet harder services, the self-esteem and identity of members of the working class are endangered both individually and collectively. While the "ordinary" (McKean 2020) is increasingly repressed and suppressed both socially and politically, the disruption of social and communal modes of living caused by global neoliberal economic practices has only been accelerated by the pandemic. The picture painted by Hikel and Milanovich should at least be updated by noting that Covid has precipitated millions into misery (Páramo *et. al.* 2021). While it has disrupted small businesses and middle classes around the globe, it also inflated the income of giant corporations as well as of those who had the financial means to endure an economic drought and have even been able to speculate. Anton Jäger has indeed persuasively argued that the main targets of contemporary populism are "(1) a stagnant capitalism increasingly centred on 'rentiership'; and (2) a disorganised civil society" (Jäger 2020, 343).

If these are true – and these analyses of trends in inequality and their socio-political implications are indeed very persuasive -, and in the light of the theoretical framework extracted from Urbinati, Mouffe, and Tarragoni, but also of the elements of Machiavellian 'populist theory' recalled in the historical section, the emergence of these new *grandi* versus the people is an urgent political problem. Accordingly, it seems no accident that one of the first measures suggested by President Joe Biden to address imbalances in the global economy has been to relaunch talks over global tax reform. The perspective offered here is theoretical rather than normative, but if it is correct, a host of such initiatives seem worth considering, if not urgently needed, and it is also crucial to ensure their effectiveness– something which is presently still unwarranted.

In the lack of such mitigations, the masses which are being torn apart from their national elites by the processes of globalization and transnational polarization, even more than deploying themselves on the left-right and/or GAL-TAN dimensions in ideological terms (Koopmans, Zürn 2019; Helbling, Jungkunz 2019) will continue to turn to populism: rather than to oppress, to find relief from oppression and despair.

5. *Conclusion: Inequality, populism, and the prospects of cosmopolitics*

In this article, I addressed the question of what populism is, why it is important, and what is its relation to inequalities. Despite its foundational relevance, the first question has been, and probably should be, left relatively open: the term 'populism' embraces a bundle of 'family resemblances' and one can usefully employ it without resorting to an essentialist approach. These are, as I noted, common conclusions in the literature about populism. Still, I have traced a perimeter of the populist dynamic by identifying convergences between thinkers as diverse as Urbinati, Mouffe, and Tarragoni. Even when they sketch a fuller account, their minimum common denominator is an understanding of populism as a particular configuration between leadership, people, and elites. They also all agree in seeing populism as a reaction to the effects of the neoliberal hegemony.

I have continued my analyses through a historical overview and a contextualization in contemporary globalized politics. In the former, I

have recalled the persistence of proto-populist themes and presuppositions for a theory of populism and inequality, especially in Machiavelli. In the latter, I have stressed the peculiarities of the present situation by expounding on the challenge of mounting global inequality.

All these sections are connected by the thread of inequalities seen as the loci for populist politics to reassert a vision of what the equality which structures 'the political' fundamentally amounts to. Populist parties, movements, and ideologies answer this question very differently depending on the context as well as on their positioning on the ideological spectrum. Yet, in the last section, I have suggested that the permanence of inequality – especially and most blatantly, but not exclusively, in its 'vertical', economic dimension – as it is diagnosed by economists such as Milanovic - is likely to maintain the door open to populism, at least in the West and in the near future.

As these inequalities can be legitimately seen as problematic, populism is not necessarily bad. Even if one does not agree with Mouffe's positive articulation of populist politics, populism can work as a 'fire alarm' by bringing to the fore issues which can then be solved, perhaps even within more traditional modes of democratic politics. That is to say, I here endorse the view that it can be a 'threat' but also a 'corrective' (Kaltwasser 2012) for democracy. Of course, this depends on several contextual conditions (some of which are identified by Kriesi 2014; 2018). Therefore, the convergences and divergencies of populist politics across countries continue to exemplify the core issues determining the articulation of democracy and its basic principle of equality at the crossroad between the *polis* and the *cosmopolis*.

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